

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Threatened Laughter?

Modernity and Humour in the
Nambudiri Jokes (Namboori Phalitangal)
from Malabar, South India

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine the jokes which used to circulate in the Southern part of India among the Malayalee Brahmins known as *Nambudiri* jokes (*Namboori phalitangal* in Malayalam language). From many of the surviving jokes the referent period seems to be the period of colonial modernity – 1850s to the early part of the 20th century.

In fact, a content analysis of many of them reveal they are about change – very often expressed through the *Nambudiri*'s "irrational" resistance against it. In this period of major changes, when the "other" seems to forget his or her position in society as lower than the *Nambudiri*, the jokes very often serve a double purpose, either of disciplining the undisciplined other (caste, gender or age marked) or the assertion of the *Nambudiri*'s difference with the rest of the "moderns."

While *Nambudiri* jokes are, like all jokes, about "releases," we cannot see them as "liberatory" by any stretch of imagination now. They are jokes by a dominant, powerful group, jokes of a community, especially, the male members of this community.

Saying this, should we see these texts as texts of simple dominance? How does dominance work at all? Through brute use of power? Or, are they emerging at a time when there are serious threats to that dominance which is perceived by the creator of the jokes, and there is a way in which the ridiculous in the self is ironically placed as a defence mechanism to confront what is bringing changes to that dominance?



Speaker

Bindu K.C.

Bindu K.C. has been working in the Gender Studies programme in Ambedkar University Delhi since 2014. Her career includes teaching and research experience in many Universities in India and abroad beginning from 2003 onwards. Discipline wise, this includes English literature as well as Women's and Gender Studies (in both teaching and research). She finished her PhD from the University of Hyderabad. The dissertation was titled "Constructing the Adivasi Identity: Reading the Dominant, Reading the Adivasi." Her M Phil work, from the same university, was in the area of Women's writing and was titled "Construction of the Self in Kamala Das' Personal Narratives."

Bindu sees herself primarily as working with the Malayalam speaking public and has consistently worked around culture of the region.

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D128, Shiv Nadar IoE

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Dear Bindu K.C.,

On behalf of the Department of English, Shiv Nadar Institution of Eminence, I thank you for delivering the talk titled “Threatened Laughter?: Modernity and Humour in the Nambudiri Jokes (*Namboori Phalitangal*) from Malabar, South India” as part of the English Seminar Series on 29th August 2024. It was a deeply engaging experience for the faculty, research scholars and students of the department.

Yours sincerely,



Sreejata Paul

Assistant Professor

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